

excerpts from
'Living Buddha, Living Christ'

by Thich Nhat Hanh

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Religious Life is Life

Twenty years ago at a conference I attended of theologians, and professors of religion, an Indian Christian friend told the assembly, "We are going to hear about the beauties of several traditions, but that does not mean that we are going to make a fruit salad." When it came my turn to speak, I said, "Fruit salad can be delicious! I have shared the Eucharist with Father Daniel Berrigan, and our worship became, possible because of the sufferings we Vietnamese and Americans shared over many years." Some of the Buddhists present were shocked to hear I had participated in the Eucharist, and many Christians seemed truly horrified. To me, religious life is life. I do not see any reason to spend one's whole life tasting just one kind of fruit. We human beings can be nourished by the best values of many traditions.

Professor Hans Kung has said, "Until there is peace between religions, there can be no peace in the world." People kill and are killed because they cling too tightly to their own beliefs and ideologies. When we believe that ours is the only faith that contains the truth, violence and suffering will surely be the result. The second precept of the Order of Interbeing, founded within the Zen Buddhist tradition during the war in Vietnam, is about letting go of views: "Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints." To me, this is the most essential practice of peace.

Dialogue: The Key to Peace

I have been engaged in peace work for more than thirty years: combating poverty, ignorance, and disease; going to sea to help rescue boat people; evacuating the wounded from combat zones; resettling refugees; helping hungry children and orphans; opposing wars; producing and disseminating peace literature; training peace and social workers; and re-building villages destroyed by bombs. It is because of the practice of meditation - stopping, calming, and looking deeply - that I have been able to nourish and protect the sources of my spiritual energy and continue this work.

During the war in Vietnam, I saw communists and anti-communists killing and destroying each other because each side believed they had a monopoly on the truth. Many Christians and Buddhists in our country were fighting each other instead of working together to stop the war. I wrote a booklet entitled "Dialogue: The Key to Peace," but my voice was drowned out by the bombs, mortars, and shouting. An American soldier standing on the back of a military truck spit on the head of my disciple, a young monk named Nhit Tri. The soldier must have thought we Buddhists were undermining America's war effort or that my disciple was a communist in disguise. Brother Nhit Tri became so angry that he thought about leaving the monastery and joining the National Liberation Front. Because I had been practicing meditation, I was able to see that everyone in the war was a victim, that the American soldiers who had been sent to Vietnam to bomb, kill, and destroy were also being killed and maimed. I urged Brother Nhit Tri to remember that the G.I. was also a war victim, the victim of a wrong view and a wrong policy, and I urged him to continue his work for peace as a monk. He was able to see that, and he became one of the most active workers in the Buddhist School of Youth for Social Service.

In 1966, I came to North America to try to help dissolve some of the wrong views that were at the root of the war. I met with hundreds of individuals and small groups, and also with members of Congress and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The visit was organized by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith peace organization, and many active Christians helped me in these efforts, among them Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Father Thomas

Merton, and Father Daniel Berrigan. These were, in fact, the Americans I found it easiest to communicate with.

Touching Jesus

But my path to discovering Jesus as one of my spiritual ancestors was not easy. The colonization of my country by the French was deeply connected with the efforts of the Christian missionaries. In the late seventeenth century, Alexandre de Rhodes, one of the most active of the missionaries, wrote in his *Cathechismus in Octo Dies Divisus*: "Just as when a cursed, barren tree is cut down, the branches that are still on it will also fall, when the sinister and deceitful Sakya [Buddha] is defeated, the idolatrous fabrications that proceed from him will also be destroyed." Later, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Catholic Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, in his efforts to evangelize Vietnam, leaned heavily on the political power of his brother, President Ngo Dinh Diem. President Diem's 1963 decree prohibiting the celebration of Wesak, the most important Buddhist national holiday, was the straw that broke our back. Tens of thousands of lay and ordained Buddhists demonstrated for religious freedom, leading to a coup d'etat and the overthrow of the Diem regime. In such an atmosphere of discrimination and injustice against non-Christians, it was difficult for me to discover the beauty of Jesus' teachings.

It was only later, through friendships with Christian men and women who truly embody the spirit of understanding and compassion of Jesus, that I have been able to touch the depths of Christianity. The moment I met Martin Luther King, Jr., I knew I was in the presence of a holy person. Not just his good work but his very being was a source of great inspiration for me. And others, less well known, have made me feel that Lord Jesus is still here with us. Hebe Kohlbrugge, a beautiful Dutch woman who saved the lives of thousands of Jews during World War II, was so committed to helping Vietnamese orphans and other desperately needy children during the war that when her government refused to support this work, she gave them back her World War II medals. Reverend Heinz Kloppenburg, General Secretary of the German Fellowship of Reconciliation, also supported our humanitarian work. He was so kind and so open, I only needed to say a few words to him and he understood everything right away. Through men and women like these, I feel I have been able to touch Jesus Christ and His tradition.

Real Communication

On the altar in my hermitage in France are images of Buddha and Jesus, and every time I light incense, I touch both of them as my spiritual ancestors. I can do this because of contact with these real Christians. When you touch someone who authentically represents a tradition, you not only touch his or her tradition, you also touch your own. This quality is essential for dialogue. When participants are willing to learn from each other, dialogue takes place just by their being together. When those who represent a spiritual tradition embody the essence of their tradition, just the way they walk, sit, and smile speaks volumes about the tradition.

In fact, sometimes it is more difficult to have a dialogue with people in our own tradition than with those of another tradition. Most of us have suffered from feeling misunderstood or even betrayed by those of our own tradition. But if brothers and sisters in the same tradition cannot understand and communicate with each other, how can they communicate with those outside their tradition? For dialogue to be fruitful, we need to live deeply our own tradition and, at the same time, listen deeply to others. Through the practice of deep looking and deep listening, we become free, able to see the beauty and values in our own and others' tradition.

Many years ago, I recognized that by understanding your own tradition better, you also develop increased respect, consideration, and understanding for others. I had had a naive thought, a kind of prejudice inherited from my ancestors. I thought that because Buddha had taught for forty-five years and Jesus for only two or three, that Buddha must have been a more accomplished teacher. I had that thought because I did not know the teachings of the Buddha well enough.

One day when he was thirty-eight years old, the Buddha met King Prasenajit of Kosala. The king said, "Reverend, you are young, yet people call you 'The Highest Enlightened One.' There are holy men in our country eighty and ninety years old, venerated by many people, yet none of them claims to be the highest enlightened one. How can a young man like you make such a claim?"

The Buddha replied, "Your majesty, enlightenment is not a matter of age. A tiny spark of fire has the power to burn down a whole city. A small poisonous snake can kill you in an instant. A baby prince has the potentiality of a king. And a young monk has the capability of becoming enlightened and changing the world."

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